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Transcript of the President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters

4. Conviction of Helms

Q. Mr. President, Mr. Helms's attorney says that his client will wear his conviction on charges to failing to testify fully before Congress as a badge of honor. Do you think it's a badge of honor, and do you think a public official has the right to lie in public about his business, under any circumstances?

A. No, it is not a badge of honor, and a public official does not have the right to lie. The Helms case is one that we inherited. I've never met Mr. Helms. I don't believe the Attorney General has ever met Mr. Helms. This is a serious problem that evolved in years past.

We had three major facets of this question: one is to uphold the law; the second was to uphold the veracity requirement, the truthfulness requirement of those who testify before Congress, and the third one was to make the best judgment we could on how to protect the security of our nation.

I think that the decision that was made by the Attorney General, confirmed by the court, was the right decision and the best decision. It does fulfill all three of those requirements. It

does not condone lying; it does uphold the law, and I think it did protect, as best we could, the security of our country.

9. Candor About Helms

Q. I'd like to go back to the Helms case for just a moment. In light of the July 25 meeting at the White House that involved you and the Attorney General and others in which you fully discussed the Helms case, I wonder, sir, if you could give us the reasons for your statement on Sept. 29 that you had not consulted with the Attorney General about the Helms case and the second part of my question is: was one consideration to avoid a public trial at all costs to keep the secrets secret?

A. The Sept. 25 meeting was not, in the first place, a thorough discussion of the Helms case. It was a brief meeting at which the Helms case was outlined with no secret material discussed, no documents examined, no mention made of people or others who might be involved, or if the trial did go to conclusion.

There was a general discussion there, fairly brief. Our hope at that time, expressed by the Attorney General, by me, the Vice President, I think by the national security adviser, was that a negotiated settlement might be reached. Then we did not think that was a likely prospect. The second question that arose was: if we had to go to trial because of an indictment, should it be concluded aggressively or would the question of national security revelations have to be faced. And we postponed that decision with an understanding that if that prospect did present itself to me that I would then be briefed on the consequences of those prospects.

That never did occur. The question that was raised in September was based on a statement by Admiral Turner, who heads up the C.I.A., the national intelligence community, that we were faced with the prospect of two alternatives: one was a decision not to prosecute at all and the other alternative that Admiral Turner mentioned, which was in the reporter's question, that the complete trial would be held with the revelation of national security secrets.

I replied that the Attorney General had never presented that information to me, which was true.

The only other contact that I had after Sept. 25 with the Attorney General on this subject at all was that one day, in passing, I think after a Cabinet meeting, he pointed out that there was an inclination on the part of Mr. Helms's attorney to act in a proper way, or patriotic way. But I have never been given any briefings about secret documents that might be revealed nor people to be involved, because, fortunately we did not have to face that prospect.

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